Reading Comprehension in Large Classes: A Practical Classroom Procedure

Balla Konaré
Institut Pédagogique National, Bamako

The teaching of reading in EFL has grown enormously in the last 30 years, as Sandra Silberstein's excellent survey article in the *Forum*'s 25th-anniversary issue makes apparent (October 1987). We have learnt more about how good readers read in their first language, and new procedures have been developed to help second-language learners become efficient readers. Increasingly, reading has been "viewed as a twofold phenomenon involving process (comprehending) and product (comprehension)" (Silberstein 1987:30).

What this means can be seen if we look first at a classroom procedure that pays some attention to the product of reading, but fails to give the learners any useful training in the process. Such a procedure might, for example, go like this:

1. The teacher presents new vocabulary, often at length.
2. The teacher reads the text aloud to the class (who has not yet seen it). S/he asks them what it is about.
3. S/he reads it aloud again while the students follow it in their books. Then s/he may ask them one or two more questions.
4. Individual students read the text aloud ("reading around the class") and the teacher interrupts to correct pronunciation.
5. The students read the text silently and try to remember as much as they can for the questions the teacher may ask afterwards.
6. The teacher asks oral questions on the text (among which literal, direct-reference *wh-* questions predominate) and students answer orally.

You may consider this a mere caricature, but I believe there are many high-school EFL classrooms around the world where reading is practised in ways like this. None of the activities involved are what the learner needs if s/he is alone and faced with a text to understand. Clearly there is little here to help students become efficient readers.

Approaches that focus on process

The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of classroom procedures that give practice in useful subskills of the reading-and-comprehending process. Jeremy Harmer sets out guidelines for this in the form of a five-stage model (Harmer 1983:151f):

1. The teacher introduces the topic and explores the students' previous knowledge of it.
2. S/he sets the tasks that the students will have to perform during or after reading. (The nature of the task determines which specific subskills of reading are practiced.)
3. The students read silently and perform the task, e.g., answer the questions set beforehand.
4. The teacher gives feedback on the students' performance of the task. (Stages 2 to 4 can be repeated.)
5. The teacher gives follow-up tasks.

Stage 2 ensures that the learners have a reason for reading—that they know, before they even begin to read, what they will have to get out of the text. This means that they read in a certain way, i.e., practice a particular subskill of reading.

The teacher (or materials writer) chooses tasks for the students to perform while they read, in light of the type of text, its organization, its content, the new language it contains and—most importantly—the reading styles that are appropriate for the act of comprehending (Williams 1984:38). Classroom reading activities are designed to *teach* students the reading comprehension process, not just to *test* their ability to come up with the right product.

Learner involvement with the text

The communicative approach to language teaching has suggested further desirable features of the *process* in classroom reading activities. In particular, realistic reading in class calls for the "involvement" of the students in what they are reading—a chance to respond emotionally or intellectually, as they might do in reading in the first language. Teachers should therefore include reading tasks that "develop a personal response to the text on the part of the student" (Morrow and Schocker 1987:251–3), or, in other words, allow different students to re-

spond differently—at least some of the time.

From precept to practice

We thus have quite clear guidelines to enable the conscientious teacher or materials writer to plan reading activities that will give the learners training in the reading-and-comprehending process. This takes us as far as the lesson plan or the teacher's guide to the textbook; it is at the *didactic* level. But what happens when the plan is translated into classroom behavior, at the *pedagogical* level? Does the average high-school teacher of EFL around the world, faced with a large, heterogeneous class, actually give a majority of the students the training that his/her lesson plan or the published teacher's guide is aiming at? Let us address some of the problems that lie in the way.

Student participation

The first problem concerns the *actual* participation of all the students in the reading activities set by the teacher. What happens all too often in large classes, when the answers to comprehension tasks are given orally, is that the activity is dominated by a small minority of the best students. Most of the class does not even have enough time to finish reading, let alone to formulate their answers, before the quick, bright, or pushy few are waving their arms about and forcing the pace of the lesson, impelling the teacher to call on them to answer. The frustration of the weaker students causes them to opt out of more and more reading activities, knowing that they won't have time to complete them and most likely will not be asked to answer. And so the gap between the few best students and the silent majority widens steadily, even though the teacher is setting the right sort of tasks to train all the students in the reading process. The teacher may be aware that many students are not participating, but may feel it is their fault, on the grounds that "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

Accuracy and fluency

The second pedagogical problem that may arise in applying the guidelines I mentioned is that the teacher may be tempted to give the same importance to the oral work generated by reading as to the reading itself. There is a long tradition of treating oral question-and-answer work on a passage as the main source of "cumulative mixed re-use" of the students' language repertoire. In this tradition many teachers try to insist simultaneously on both the *content* of their students' answers (i.e., their communicative value) and their *expression* (i.e., their linguistic correctness). Inevitably they fall between the two stools of accuracy and fluency (Brumfit 1984). You can't stress correctness without inhibiting fluency, and students in large classes whose spoken English is weak will be intimidated or handicapped in giving oral answers to reading comprehension tasks, even if they have got the right answers.

But if the teacher's objective is to develop the skills involved in text comprehension, then logically his/her evaluation of the students' answers should focus only on their content.

Reconciling the requirements

As I have made clear, I believe that if reading comprehension activities in large classes are to be motivating and worthwhile, they should ensure the participation of the whole class and at the same time enable the teacher to check that this is so. It is only when at least some of the answers to comprehension tasks are *written* that the teacher can really know how many of his/her students are performing correctly. A very quick check can allow the teacher to see how many students have actually written *something,* regardless of whether it is right or wrong, correctly or incorrectly expressed.

Another important requirement of whole-class involvement is that the teacher should encourage *alternative* answers, differing both in content and expression. This means getting a number of different students, weak ones as well as strong, to read out what they have written, and for *the teacher to refrain from evaluating it* until several students have given their answers. For as soon as the teacher gives the stamp of his/her approval to an answer, many students (in any authoritarian

What happens all too often in large classes is that the activity is dominated by a small minority of the best students.

Does the average high-school teacher of EFL actually give the students the training that his/her lesson plan is aiming at?

school system) will begin to think that all other answers must be wrong.

But this focus on content and encouragement of alternatives (i.e., a fluency-oriented approach) does not rule out attention to correctness at a later stage. It may well be that the examination system requires students to answer comprehension questions in writing, and that the quality of expression counts. So after the answers have been read out, the teacher may want to correct the expression of some of them in detail, e.g., on the chalkboard. It is also possible for later tasks to concentrate on linguistic features of the text, and here too the focus may be on accuracy.

These then are some of the ideas that underlie the classroom procedure that I will now set out—a procedure designed to translate the *didactic* guidelines for training in the reading process into successful *pedagogical* practice.

Classroom procedure for reading in large classes

1. Introduce the topic of the text and ask some questions (for immediate oral answers) to explore the students' knowledge of the topic. This prepares them for what they are going to read, creating expectations and stimulating their interest in the topic. It enables them to bring something of their own to the reading of the text.

2. Select a few words or expressions from the text (4 or 5 maximum) to pre-teach or review very quickly (max. 2 minutes per item). Choose only key words that are essential for understanding the text. The classroom treatment of reading is often ruined by excessive pre-teaching of new words, which prevents the students from developing the important skill of guessing or ignoring unknown words, and may cause them to give up every time they find words they don't know. Moreover, limiting the pre-teaching of vocabulary to a few key items makes it possible to devote more time to the actual reading-and-understanding activities.

3. Before the students look at the text, write one or two focus questions on the chalkboard. This gives the students a purpose in their reading of the text. As they read, they think about the text and see whether it reinforces or contradicts the ideas, opinions, and expectations they had in mind. They concentrate much better on meaning and are more involved with the text. Moreover, although purposeful reading is only *simulated* in the EFL class, it is realistic in the sense that reading in real life is generally done with some objective.

If you want them to practice *skimming* or *scanning,* this must be the first reading task, as you cannot realistically skim or scan a text that you have already read. For skimming, the focus question should be of the type "What is this text about?" and there should be a time limit for finding the answer. For scanning, the focus question should require specific detailed information, and again there should be a time limit.

4. The students read the text (or a section of it) silently and write down their answers to the focus question(s). Silent reading is the normal way most educated adults read in real life. And certainly students should not listen to a reading aloud first, whether by the teacher or by other students. Reading is reading, and listening is listening. We don't normally hear a text before reading it; and in any case, most teachers don't read aloud well enough for their students to understand much of what they hear. As for reading aloud by the students, it may have its uses—and it's certainly very popular—but it's hard enough even *after* they have gotten to know the text, and impossible to do well when the text is new to them.

Having students *write* their answers to the focus questions, rather than answering them orally, allows *all* the students to perform the task and enables the teacher, by going around and monitoring their work, to get an idea of how many of them are able to do so (which is almost impossible with oral answers).

5. Ask some students (particularly those who do not put their hands up) to read out their answers. After a student does so the teacher is careful not to say "Good" or "That's right," but merely says "Thank you" and goes on to another

student. This encourages students to give alternative answers, or different formulations of the same answer; whereas if the teacher says that an answer is right, others may be tempted to just repeat it, thinking their own answer was wrong. At the end, of course, the teacher can say what is right or what s/he thinks. At this stage, there should be no correction of language mistakes—we are interested in the meaning of the text, not how students express their answers.

6. Have two or three students come to the board and write up their answers. The others point out mistakes or suggest improvements. The purpose of sending more than one student to the board is to get alternative answers, or, if they deal with different questions, to save time. It is at this stage that attention is paid to correctness of expression as well as to the content of answers. By pointing out and correcting their peers' mistakes (always a popular activity) students get practice in monitoring written answers, which may be useful for the reading comprehension test they have in their exams.

7. Ask about the students' results and check some individuals. This is very important as it gives the teacher useful information about the students' performance and at the same time develops their motivation.

8. Write up a second and even a third lot of focus questions on the board and repeat steps 4 to 7. This gives the students much more reading from the same amount of text: it exploits the material more completely. The students also get practice in the mechanics of reading faster.

Follow up to reading

The steps I have described cover the reading process itself, but they do not, of course, exhaust the possible class activities based on the text. These include:

- oral questions and answers of all types (literal, inferential)
- student-to-student questions on the text
- general knowledge and discussion questions on the topic of the text
- questions about the author's intentions, style, character
- personal questions relating the text to the students' own feelings, lives, experiences
- questions about word meanings in the text (developing guessing skills)
- questions about the organization and layout of the text

You can even have a student read the text aloud, not one, but two or three sentences at a time. (Otherwise the other students don't listen to the student reading; they all prepare the next sentence instead.) The teacher should not interrupt a student's reading in mid-sentence to correct a mispronunciation. S/he should wait until the end of the sentence and then correct or have the student re-read.

Conclusion

The usual problem that I have found in large traditional classes is that teachers tend to concentrate on what I have called follow-up activities, but all too often omit steps 4 to 7 above—*the actual procedure for reading.* Follow up deals with the *product* of reading; but, as I argued earlier, students need training in the *process* itself. The procedure I have outlined above is time consuming, but it has the huge advantage of involving most of the students—not just the clever few—in developing the skills they will need to become good readers.

REFERENCES

Brumfit, C. 1984. *Communicative methodology in language teaching: The roles of fluency and accuracy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harmer, J. 1983. *The practice of English language teaching.* Harlow: Longman.

Morrow, K. and M. Schocker. 1987. Using texts in a communicative approach. *ELT Journal, 41,* 4.

Silberstein, S. 1987. Let's take another look at reading: Twenty-five years of reading instruction. *English Teaching Forum, 25,* 4, pp. 28–35.

Williams, E. 1984. *Reading in the language classroom.* London: Macmillan.

Balla Konaré *is at the Institut Pédagogique National in Bamako, Mali. He has also taught at the elementary and secondary level. In 1991 he earned a Master's in Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick in England. His current interests are in-service teacher training and syllabus design.*